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# Was the First President of the United States a Swede?

Elisabeth Thorsell\*

The following query has been posted by both American and Swedish researchers in various types of media, including *Anbytarforum*, the query section of the e-zine *Rötter* ([www.genealogi.se](http://www.genealogi.se)), a web site maintained by *Sveriges Släktforskarförbund* (the Federation of Swedish Genealogical Societies):

I am looking for information about Colonel John Hansson, who was married to Margareta Vasa, grandchild of Gustaf Vasa, founder of the Royal House of Vasa. They lived in the early 1600s. John was in the Swedish Army and died during the battle at Lützen in 1632. He had four sons who came to Fort Christina in Delaware to establish a Swedish colony at the request of the Queen. One of the four brothers had a son, John Hanson, who became the first president of the Continental Congress in the U.S. in 1782.

There are variations to the query, some including more generations between the brothers who emigrated and the politician John Hanson from Charles County, Maryland.

## The generations

The relationship between *President John Hanson* and *Colonel John Hansson*, who died at the battle at Lützen, seems to be accepted. There is even a marble plaque on a wall of the old Swedish-American church Gloria Dei in Philadelphia in remembrance of the colonel, obviously mounted long after his death.

But this is not how it was. Colonel John Hansson was not married to Margareta Vasa, he did not die during the battle at Lützen, and it seems he did not even exist. Nor has it been found that four Hansson brothers came to New Sweden; or that any of these non-existing brothers became the grandfather of John Hanson, President of the Continental Congress.

It is a human tendency to embellish one's ancestry a little bit, and this is a good example. There is among my own female ancestors a woman by the name of Stina Pettersdotter. However, upon her death in 1913, she was registered as

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“the widow Christina Svensson,” which the survivors probably thought more impressive.

### The origin of the myth

In 1876 a gentleman by the name of George Adolphus Hanson wrote a book called *Old Kent: The Eastern Shore of Maryland*. In it he tells about the four brothers Hansson—Andrew, William, Randolph, and John—who supposedly lived with Governor Johan Printz. They are said to have fled to Maryland when Johan Printz went home in 1653.



**Fig. 1.** John Hanson (Courtesy Svenska Emigrantinstitutet, Växjö, Sweden).

This story attracted attention and Amandus Johnson, the industrious founder of the American Swedish Historical Museum in Philadelphia, made sure that John Hanson's memory was kept alive at Gloria Dei. Because of this, the story about the illustrious colonel received its place in the Swedish-American tradition and contributed to many peoples' pride in Sweden's small contribution to the history of the United States.

### Other voices

Allan Kastrup notes in *The Swedish Heritage in America* (1975) that nothing can be said with certainty about John Hanson's origin, but that he may have been Swedish. Professor Sten Carlsson wrote an article from the Swedish point of view—"John Hanson's Swedish Background," *Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* (1978:1)—stating that John Hanson's origin is rather obscure. He is said to be born in either 1715 or 1721 in Charles County, Maryland, the grandson (son's son) of Samuel Hanson, he in turn the son of the emigrant John. However, a record of his birth has not been found. He also maintains that everything that has been written about John Hanson during the 1900s is based on George A. Hanson's book, which according to Sten Carlsson proved to be poorly structured, lacked family tables, and contained questionable references.

Still, Sten Carlsson agrees that the name appears to be Swedish, even if the family tradition also mentions British origins going all the way back to Yorkshire during the 1200s. The baptismal names point to England and, according to George A. Hanson, the Swedish contribution to the family stems from a John Hanson of London marrying a woman during a summer trip in the late 1500s who had close connections but no family ties with the royal family. Both husband and wife supposedly died young, but left a son, the future colonel. He was about the same age as Gustaf II Adolf who was born 1594. The son is said to have been brought up at the court and then made his career in the military. One problem with this theory is that a colonel by this name has not been found in the Swedish Army during the time in question (i.e., before 1632).

It was not George A. Hanson who brought up the theory of John Hanson's wife being a Vasa descendent, but later enthusiasts, who obviously were easily proven wrong. The story about how the young brothers Hanson had been encouraged by sixteen-year-old Queen Kristina to emigrate in 1642 also seems rather unlikely. Sten Carlsson seems to accept that the colonel had the four above-mentioned sons and that they were born in Sweden, traveled to New Sweden, and later settled in Maryland.

### The most likely story

Later research has shown that the four brothers never existed in New Sweden. Data have been found regarding only one of them, Anders Hansson. He had a brother named Mats Hansson. There is no mention of any other brothers.

In October 1988, George Ely Russel, a very well-known American researcher, published an article called "John Hanson of Maryland, A Swedish Heritage Disproved" in *The American Genealogist* (Vol. 63:4). Mr. Russel checked the sources for information and found that John Hanson (the emigrant) lived in Maryland in 1662, when he changed jobs. He was a so-called indentured servant, which does not exactly mean that he lived in serfdom, but was bound by contract to the farm owner. His first master was William Plumley from Barbados. In 1661 John's contract was sold to Edward Keene of Calvert County, Maryland, who had come from England in 1653. He in turn sold it to John Geere. John Hanson later became the owner of a small farm.

John Hanson's (the emigrant) only known wife was Mary, last name unknown. Their children's names were Robert, Benjamin, Mary, Anne, Sarah, John, and Samuel. All of them married people with typical British names. The Swedes in the area typically married other Swedes, which is often obvious by the naming custom. Also, the sources show that John Hanson never was in contact with another Swede and did not live in an area inhabited by Swedes. Furthermore, it does not seem that he had any contact at all with his alleged brother, Anders Hansson, of Beaver Neck, Kent County, Maryland.

Anders Hansson and other Swedes who settled in this area left numerous documents that have been published by Amandus Johnson in *Swedish Settlements on the Delaware, 1638-1644* (1911). John Hanson is not to be found here. No naturalization documents, which would have been absolutely necessary in order for him to become a British citizen and own land in Maryland, have been found. It is a fact that he owned land in Maryland, which he willed away at his death in 1713. His possible "higher" status as the grandson of a royal descendent is never mentioned in Maryland; he is never called esquire or gentleman.

### More about New Sweden

Peter Stebbins Craig, today's authority on New Sweden and its people, writes in *The 1693 Census of the Swedes on the Delaware* (1993) that Anders Hansson arrived in New Sweden as an adult in 1641, accompanied by his brother Mats. They belonged to the later opposition against Johan Printz, who ordered his lieutenant Johan Papegoja to hire Indians to shoot them. Mats was killed and Anders moved to Maryland. His children called themselves Hanson and the above-mentioned George A. Hanson seems to be descended from them. Mats' widow, Elisabet, remarried Anders Larsson Dalbo and lived in Kingessing. Her son, Peter Matsson, married Catharine Rambo, the daughter of Peter Rambo, and their daughter Maria eventually married the Swedish pastor Andreas Sandel.

Dr. Craig further contends that there was only one John Hanson in New Sweden, a boy born in 1655 to Hans Månsson and Ella Stille. He later called himself John Hans Steelman and became a well-known businessman and interpreter among the Indians in northern Maryland in the late 1600s.

So the story about the United States' first president, before George Washington, being of Swedish descent can now be relegated to the bottom of the myths.